

Social Analysis Systems²

Concepts and Tools for
Collaborative Research and Social Action

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Title

Impacts on Knowledge and Skills among Participants in a Youth Exchange Program

Key Words

The Socratic Wheel, Cuba, Ukraine, Benin, Thailand, Canada, Impact Assessment, Skills

Reference and Acknowledgement

Jacques M. Chevalier and Daniel Buckles. 2006. Impacts on knowledge and skills among participants in a Youth Exchange Program, Social Analysis Systems², Technique Report #18, 8 pp. Retrieved: <http://idl-bnc.idrc.ca/dspace/handle/123456789/104>. The authors wish to acknowledge Paul Turcot, Kate McLaren and Helen Patterson, who helped prepare the source reports cited below.

Context

Canada World Youth (CWY) is a Canadian non-governmental organization focused on youth programming in Canada and abroad. Previous assessments of CWY programs suggested that knowledge and skills is an important impact area from the point of view of past participants and future program design. In 2006 it undertook a new assessment of the impact the Youth Exchange Program had on participants and communities in five countries, including Canada, Cuba, the Ukraine, Benin, and Thailand. One-day workshops for past participants in the Youth Exchange Program were organized in each country, covering six impact areas identified in previous CWY assessments: 1) values and attitudes; 2) knowledge; 3) skills; 4) occupational gains; 5) interpersonal relationships and; 6) civic engagement (local or global). Half-day workshops were also organized with representatives of participating communities and an on-line survey was conducted with a sample of Canadian past participants and representatives of communities. CWY staff at various levels were engaged in comparing and analyzing results

from different countries. The evaluation team included CWY staff in each country as well as external consultants. They selected, tested, adapted and sequenced various SAS² techniques for the purpose of assessing how and to what extent the Youth Exchange Program contributed to the mission of CWY.

For more information on the design of the assessment see: South House Exchange, SAS² Learning Systems, and Canada World Youth. 2006. Canada World Youth Impact Assessment Guide, Montréal: Canada World Youth, Social Analysis Systems² 1.0 (<http://www.sas-pm.com>), Protocol Report #1, 58 pp. For more information on the results of the assessment see: South House Exchange, SAS² Learning Systems, and Canada World Youth. 2006. Canada World Youth Impact Assessment: Synthesis Report. Montréal: Canada World Youth, 84 pp.

Purpose

To assess the impact of the Youth Exchange Program on past participants.

Process Summary

The evaluation team convened one day workshops in 17 different locations involving a total of 289 past participants in the Youth Exchange Program between 1995 and 2002. The participation rates for overseas participants ranged from 60% of all past participants in Benin, to approximately 25% of all past participants in Thailand and Ukraine. Canadian participation rates were lower given that the number of Canadians involved between 1993 and 2003 was over 5,000. The participants were fairly representative of their country programs with respect to gender balance, and rural / urban balance. There were one or more representatives from every year under review in all countries.

During the workshops a series of diagnostic assessments were conducted on various impact areas using different SAS² techniques. After discussing the knowledge and skill impact areas during the workshop and the purpose of this part of the assessment, each participant scored the impact of the Youth Exchange Program on five knowledge and skills areas, using a scale of 0 to 5. Participants were reminded by the facilitators that skills were understood to

mean a concrete ability to do something, rather than something like being open-minded, which is an attitude. Individuals charted their scores on a wheel and noted details explaining their scores. Participants then looked for others with similar scores marked on their wheels, and formed groups with similar impact profiles. The members of each group discussed what they had in common and chose an image or symbol that represented the set of knowledge or skills the group had most developed or strengthened through the CWY experience. Similarities and differences between groups were discussed, along with the reasons why the program had more impact in some areas and less impact in others. The results were integrated into workshop, national and summary reports by the evaluation team. Participants understood that the results would be used in reports on the program, and agreed to share their information.

Analysis

Participants rated five specific impact areas identified by CWY: 1) knowledge; 2) organizational skills; 3) communication skills; 4) learning skills; 5) technical skills. Examples provided of knowledge impacts were increases among participants in their knowledge of history, culture, geography, politics, development issues, aid, or any other related knowledge area. Organizational skill impacts referred to improvements in team work, leadership, facilitation, mediation, planning or any other related ability. Communication skill impacts referred to abilities in language, cross-cultural communications, non-verbal communications, listening, interviewing, speaking in public or any other related ability. Examples of learning skill impacts were increases in analysis, data collection, capacity to adapt, creative thinking and other related abilities. Technical skill impacts referred to farming, computer use, teaching or any other ability requiring technical know-how.

The rating scale used by the participants was:

0 = No impact; 1 = Very small impact; 2 = Small impact
3 = Moderate impact; 4 = Important impact;
5 = Very important impact

The average of all scores on all impact areas is 4, indicating an “important impact” of the Youth Exchange Program from the point of view of past participants. The average of individual scores for each country also shows a consistent pattern of high impacts on the knowledge and skills of past participants (Table 1). The top two skill areas indicated by these national averages are **communication skills** and **organization skills**. These two received the highest rating in every country except in Thailand where communication skills were rated lower than organization and learning skills.

The impact areas with the highest variability between the countries are knowledge and learning skills, scoring higher on average in some countries and lower in others. For example, participants in Benin rated knowledge at 3.1, their lowest rating among all of the impact areas in this exercise. Participants in Cuba rated this impact area at 4.3. Impact on learning skills received ratings from as low as 3.5 (Canada) to a high of 4.2 (Cuba). It is interesting to note that while the Cuban rating was the highest for this impact area, learning skills received a relatively low score compared to other impact areas. This may be explained by the fact that the Cuban participants are all teachers by profession and view themselves as expert learners. The skill area receiving the lowest rating in every country (except Benin) is technical skills.

Table 1: Average of Individual Scores for Knowledge and Skills, by Country

Country	# of participants	Average of Individual Scores*				
		Communic. Skills	Organization Skills	Learning Skills	Knowledge	Technical Skills
Cuba	61	4.5	4.5	4.2	4.3	4.0
Ukraine	28	4.5	4.3	3.9	4.0	3.3
Canada	64	4.3	3.9	3.5	4.0	2.4
Benin	74	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.1	3.4
Thailand	62	3.8	4.1	4.1	3.8	3.6
Weighted average for all 289		4.2	4.1	3.9	3.8	3.3

* Note that the highest scores per country are in bold.

Within each country, there are some variations among workshops.

However, the highest and lowest rated areas remain the same. The small group averages also tend to reflect the tendencies of the workshop averages.

The individual and small group observations on the scores are consistent with the general pattern. Participants typically make references to high impacts in many areas, as in the following cases:

“The impact it had on my life was very significant because it developed in me organizational skills such as team work, leadership — because a teacher must be a leader par excellence —, mediation, organization, and planning work, among other skills. As for knowledge, I learned about history, culture, geography, social and political problems in another country, in addition to mine. We spoke so much about sustainable development and environmental protection that I developed an ecological awareness. Seven years later, knowing that I have grown more mature, I now realize that CWY was the force, the principal source of motivation to learn and take decisions, to grow as an independent person, and to maintain my equilibrium” (Author’s translation).

“As participants we came in rusty, and improved during the CWY program. Knowledge, organizational and communication skill impacts were high since a lot of time was spent on group facilitation and being in a group environment.” (from the “Thin Man” group in Toronto)

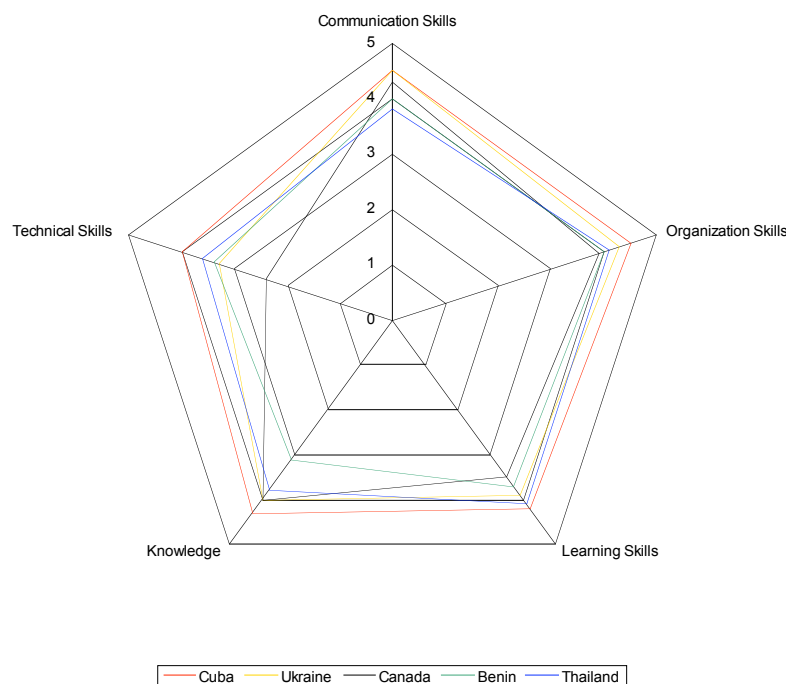
The key words used by individuals and small groups to describe these impacts show up with different frequencies. Among the key **communication skills**, language and knowing how to listen are frequently mentioned. Speaking in public and non-verbal-communication are mentioned less frequently. References to impacts on key **organizational skills** frequently include leadership, team work, and facilitation. Being organized and planning skills are also mentioned, though less often. Although the average impact on **knowledge** varies from country to country, there are many references in individual notes to learning about the culture and history of the host countries and their own countries as they struggled to share their knowledge with others. The ability to adapt was the **learning skill** most frequently mentioned in notes by the participants. A word count for “adaptability” found 20 out of 64 participants in Canada making reference to this skill. Other learning skills, such as analytic skills, data or information management, and creative thinking, are mentioned by participants in other countries although much less often. A few references are also made to critical

thinking and knowing how to carry out research. **Technical skills** developed through the program involve mostly the use of computer and the internet. Manual skills (agriculture, carpentry) are mentioned rarely. Some participants noted that the program offers them few opportunities to develop new technical skills, something they would have liked to see built into the program design. Others, like the Canadian and some of the Ukrainian participants, noted that they already had computer skills when they joined the program.

Interpretation

The CWY program had an important impact on the development of all knowledge and skill areas (Graph 1). Many discovered and developed skills they didn't think they had or needed to strengthen, pointing to the Socratic discovery of latent learning. These results reflect the theory that the impact areas are interrelated and that the CWY experience is wholistic. It is also consistent with the CWY mission "to foster the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for active community involvement."

Graph 1: Average of Individual Scores for Knowledge and Skills, by Country



The skills that consistently benefited the most from the Youth Exchange Program are communication and organizational skills. This confirms the centrality of impacts on interpersonal relationships flagged in other parts of the impact assessment. This category of skills is targeted in various program activities and are strengthened through educational activity days, group activities, and in the interaction between counterparts and their host families and work placements.

Better **communication skills** reflects the strengthening of English language skills that are part and parcel of the CWY experience, but also the opportunity to live and work across cultural and linguistic divides. Being able to express oneself well, listen and understand, pick up non-verbal cues and to be comfortable speaking in groups or in public, are clear effects of the situation participants found themselves in during the exchange.

The high scores given for **organizational skills**, such as team work, leadership, facilitation, planning and mediation, reflect the emphasis that CWY places on working collaboratively in groups, on building leadership capacities and on taking responsibility for one's work and commitments. It also reflects the fact that participation in the program involves a "constant need to plan and organize activities with one's counterpart or the group. Mastering these skills became essential for the good functioning of the program" (Thai Report). To work in a team, each individual needs to deal with a range of human behaviours, needs and expectations, and to understand and mediate cultural and personal differences. In the intense learning process of the program some participants discovered skills they didn't know they had, like the "leaders" group in a workshop in Ukraine. Through work placements, group and project activities, participants learned other important job-related skills such as being punctual and personally well organized.

The relatively low scores for **technical** skills stand apart from the other skill and knowledge areas since building technical skill is not

an explicit goal of the Youth Exchange Program. It is, however, a skill area that participants flagged as a gap in the CWY experience.

Action

The evaluation team combined the results of the exercise with results from other parts of the impact assessment toward an overall assessment of the impact the Youth Exchange Program on participants and communities. It recommended, based on this broader set of results, that CWY ground its emphasis on individual learning objectives in specific community projects. This subtle strategic shift would imply adjustments to the work placement component of the exchange program, to put both the work and the community experience at the centre of the learning agenda. The anticipated effect would be to have a longer-term impact on host communities while at the same time building relevant individual technical or professional skills, in addition to communication, learning, and organizational skills.

Observations on the Process

Participants initially thought that low scores would imply that a participant feels the program did a poor job of skill transfer. This concern was managed by workshop facilitators who emphasized that a low score could be given if the participant thought they had these skills before coming to the program.

The results of individual exercises were strongly endorsed by the participants, many of whom noted that the visual display of the scores made it easy to appreciate the overall impact of the program on skills. While comparisons between groups were made after the individual exercises were completed, a thorough review of the final report by members of the Board of CWY, staff and representatives of the various national exchange programs confirmed the relevance and usefulness of both the individual and the compiled results.